



France midfielder Zinedine Zidane gives an interview to French television channel Canal Plus on Wednesday explaining his version of the event of the headbutt in the World Cup Final.

PHOTO: AFP

Zidane bares his soul

Football

REUTERS, Paris

Zinedine Zidane said on Wednesday he attacked defender Marco Materazzi during the World Cup final to defend the honour of his mother and sister.

The French captain said he could not let Materazzi's words on the pitch go unanswered, though he admitted head-butting the Italian was not a good thing to do.

In an interview with the French television channel Canal Plus, a chastened-looking Zidane also apologised to children and fans but said that he did not regret the attack which led to his sending off.

"He (Materazzi) pulled on my shirt several times and I told him that we could swap shirts at the end of the game if he wanted to," Zidane said in the live interview.

"He then pronounced very tough words, words that hurt me deeply, words about my mother and my sister. At first, I tried not to listen to him but he kept repeating them," Zidane said.

"I knew it was my last game and I knew there were only 10 minutes to play but things happened very swiftly," he said.

"I am a man before anything else."

Materazzi has denied mentioning Zidane's mother during the game in Berlin last Sunday.

Zidane, widely considered the greatest player of his generation, rammed his head into Materazzi's chest with the score at 1-1 and minutes to play in the second

period of extra time.

The 34-year-old, who said the final would be his last professional game, was shown a red card and left the pitch in tears watched by his stunned teammates.

France, deprived of their leader and chief penalty-taker lost the game 5-3 on penalties.

Zidane denied Materazzi called him an Islamic "terrorist," as was reported by a Paris-based anti-racism group.

Born in Marseille in 1972, Zidane is of Algerian origin. His parents are from the village of Agumone in the Kabylie region.

FIFA decided on Tuesday to open a disciplinary investigation into the incident and Sepp Blatter, head of soccer's ruling body, suggested Zidane could be stripped of the tournament's best player award.

The French playmaker said he was ready to face any disciplinary hearing and stressed that he was confident about the outcome.

"If someone can read (Materazzi's) lips, they will show that I'm telling the truth. The one who is really guilty must be punished," Zidane said.

"I don't want to attack anyone but I want to defend myself. I did something wrong and I was punished for that. I ended up alone in the changing rooms," Zidane said.

"But I was the one who was provoked and I reacted. It is always the one who reacts who is punished, never the one who provokes and this is not fair," he said.

Zidane apologised for his

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France forgives her talisman

Football

BBCONLINE, undated

It had the makings of an address to the nation from the head of state.

Across the country, families gathered round TV sets; in bars they ordered extra drinks.

The sports daily L'Equipe ran a cartoon of Zidane sitting behind an ornate desk, alongside a French flag - as if about to speak from the Elysee Palace.

What France and the world wanted to hear were the precise words Marco Materazzi had said to Zinedine Zidane during the World Cup final to provoke the red mist.

Zidane apologised for his headbutt but said he did not regret his actions, alleging that Materazzi had insulted both his mother and sister.

Zidane's refusal to repeat the exact words still has everyone guessing.

Even so, commentators were lining up within minutes of the broadcast, mostly to praise the newly-retired footballer.

The 24-hour television news channel LCI devoted an entire half-hour programme to Zidane's two interviews.

The former French coach Michel Hidalgo described his explanation as "touching, dignified, human".

Bernard Tapie, the maverick former chairman of Olympique Marseille, said the player had shown lots of courage.

Earlier this week, the same sports daily had harsh words for Zidane after his red card.

"How could he explain his act, it asked, to the tens of millions of children watching around the world?"

Now that the player has apologised, the paper's tone is once again reverential.

"Zinedine Zidane has spoken," says the editorial. It was his "solemn way of saying 'au revoir', after the missed chance of Berlin".

The tabloid France Soir compares the player's words to those of Edith Piaf. "Non, il ne regrette rien," says the front-page headline.

Inside the paper, the president of the CRAN, an umbrella group of black associations, draws a paral-

lel with the violence of the "banlieues", France's poor suburbs.

For Patrick Lozes, the headbutt was unacceptable but sprang from a similar sense of exasperation.

"Why do we come to understand Zidane," he asked, "but not the young people in the suburbs?"

The left-wing daily Liberation offers a rare voice of dissent to the chorus of approval for Zidane's appearance.

However deplorable, it notes, insults on the football pitch have always existed.

The astonishing thing was that at 34 years old, Real Madrid's former playmaker had fallen for what his teammate Lilian Thuram described as an "Italian trap".

The paper goes on to compare Zidane's sending-off with that of David Beckham in the 1998 World Cup against Argentina.

Then, the reaction of the 23-year-old Englishman was contrite, recognising that he had damaged his team.

"Zidane did no such thing yesterday," says Liberation. "He did

not have a word for his teammates, whom he perhaps cost the World Cup."

Some find what he had to say about racism in football just as significant as his account of the headbutt.

Throughout his long career, says L'Equipe, never had Zidane evoked the subject with such conviction.

In the second interview he gave, on France's main private channel TF1, Zidane spoke of his desire to see FIFA tackle racist comments on the pitch.

He singled out the Italian senator and prominent Northern League politician Roberto Calderoli, who has been quoted as saying that France "sacrificed its identity by fielding a team of blacks, Islamists and communists".

"Is that not worse than what I did?" he asked. "It shocked me."

France has not lost its admiration and affection for Zinedine Zidane.

A newspaper poll this week found that 61% of French people had already forgiven him over the headbutt.

Pekerman urged to stay on

AFP, Buenos Aires

The Argentine Football Federation (AFA) is hoping to convince recently departed World Cup coach Jose Pekerman to reconsider his resignation, president Julio Grondona said Wednesday.

Pekerman quit following Argentina's quarterfinal elimination at the hands of hosts Germany on penalties in the World Cup.

"That's it, the chapter is finished," he said at the time.

But Grondona has not given up hope of keeping hold of Pekerman.

"Things can change. We need to talk and find out the reasons that pushed him (Pekerman) to resign," said Grondona. "In life, as in football, people can change their mind."

Other names in the running to take over, according to the Argentine press, include Carlos Bianchi and Diego Maradona.

Ten Sports bags UCL rights

PTI, Mumbai

Ten Sports has bagged exclusive rights to telecast the UEFA Champions League in the Indian sub-continent for the next three seasons.

Telecast of matches will start in September, 2006 and will include 1,000 hours of Europe's leading football action, the channel said in a press release.

ESPN-Star Sports was broadcasting the competition in the region till last season.

Ten Sports will also show special programmes on the Champions League.

"We will have our own live studio shows around each day of Champions League football, bringing goals and action from every game played that day, further enhancing the viewing experience," Ten Sports Vice-President (Programming) Peter Hutton said.

FIFA lifts ban on Greece

REUTERS, London

FIFA has lifted its suspension of the Greek football federation after the Greek parliament approved an amendment to its legislation relating to sport.

The moves means Greece's friendly against England at Old Trafford in August can go ahead and that Greek clubs will be eligible for European competition.

FIFA imposed the ban because the original sports law gave the government too much say in running Greek football issues, notably

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Materazzi to be investigated

Football

AGENCIES, Undated

FIFA said Thursday they have opened a disciplinary inquiry into the behaviour of Italy World Cup winning defender Marco Materazzi.

In a statement, FIFA said: "The decision was taken following claims made by French soccer star Zinedine Zidane, who attacked Materazzi with a headbutt during the final of the FIFA World Cup in Berlin on July 9."

According to the statement, Zidane said in an interview that he reacted to repeated provocation

from the Italian.

FIFA will study the circumstances of the incident and both players -- Zidane is already under investigation -- are due to present their cases to the world football governing body by July 18.

They will then have to appear in person before FIFA's disciplinary commission in Zurich on July 20, their first meeting since Zidane felled Materazzi with a butt to the chest just minutes from the end of extra-time in the World Cup final, which Italy won on penalties.

Meanwhile, Materazzi insisted that Zidane deserved to be named best player at the World Cup despite his actions in the World Cup final.

Journalists still selected Zidane for the Golden Ball award, and Materazzi disagreed with FIFA president Sepp Blatter's suggestion that the 34-year-old French captain could be stripped of the title.

"He won it for what he did on the pitch," Materazzi told the Gazzetta dello Sport. "He was the best."

Materazzi acknowledged he insulted Zidane, who he called his "hero," without giving specifics.

"I didn't say anything to him about racism, religion or politics," Materazzi said. "I didn't talk about his mother, either. I lost my mother when I was 15 and even now I still get emotional talking about her."



PHOTO: JEFFREY NIEMANN

A recent photograph shows the Emirates Stadium, which will play host to English top-flight club Arsenal from the coming season replacing their old Highbury ground. Located in Ashburton Grove the new 60,000-seater stadium will host its first match, a testimonial for Dennis Bergkamp, on the 22nd of July.



PHOTO: AFP

SERVES YOU RIGHT: Italian defender Marco Materazzi gestures after French midfielder Zinedine Zidane is sent off for headbutting him during the World Cup final on July 9.